

ABOUT NEW YORK

By MEYER BERGER

James J. Lyons's passionate loyalty to the Bronx, where he is Borough President, sometimes leads him into flights of humor and fantasy.

Last week he recklessly proposed formation of a Bronx Bay Company to trap Bronx mink and Bronx weasels. He made public a letter in which he had asked Park Commissioner Moses to survey wild life in the borough.

In sudden urge, last Spring, Mr. Lyons marched on Marble Hill, Manhattan's northernmost outpost, planted the Bronx flag there and blandly announced he would annex the hill.

In the heat last July Mr. Lyons got word to metropolitan journals that he would move to have the Giant Kubri, largest of flora, adopted as the borough's official flower. The Kubri is offensively assertive, but this did not deter Mr. Lyons.

"Maybe it don't smell sweet," he conceded, "but it's healthy and it grows fast—like the Bronx."

Mr. Lyons never meant to annex Marble Hill. He has never seen a Bronx weasel nor a Bronx mink. The first he heard of these animals in the borough was a week ago Saturday, when a mink trapper turned up in Pelham. Nor has Mr. Lyons ever done anything about the Giant Kubri except to forget it.

He justifies his brief interest in these matters by his devotion to the home borough. "Anything I can do to bring the Bronx before the public," he stoutly insists, "I'm going to do it." Sometimes, though, Mr. Lyons gets the uneasy feeling that some of these efforts may harm his career. "I think these gags can be overdone," he says gloomily.

These moods pass, however, and Mr. Lyons usually rallies by reasoning that he must carry on because he is a one-man minority; a lone Democrat grimly facing fourteen La Guardia Fusionists in the Board of Estimate. The Crown, he is apt to point out, hires a heckler to represent Opposition in Parliament.

"It's a royal tradition," the Borough President tells his friends. With this off his mind, he feels better.

The ideas behind Mr. Lyons's heroic whimsies, he sometimes confides, have not always been his own. A post card from a high school student asking for a definition of the Bronx boundaries, for example, started the Marble Hill annexation move.

History's cumbersome gears, in this case, got in petus from the word "anschluss," dropped into Mr. Lyons's stream of consciousness by a reporter. Mr. Lyons promptly stormed the Hill while the photoflashes popped.

He was referred to, in the Marble Hill stories, as "the Bronx Fuehrer." He winced at this, but let it pass, finding comfort in the altruistic thought that it was all for the good and welfare of the Bronx.

Mr. Lyons, however, is really a conservative man. He had a long career in the leather trade, in which he was something of a super-salesman. When his conscious whimsies plague him he keeps repeating, "I'm a good business man"—and he is.

"I just take it on the chin for the Bronx," he says fervently, "because I love the Bronx with all my heart."

Mr. Lyons has a tendency to skip over, or to avoid altogether, the first phase of his life. He was born, not in the Bronx, but on Leroy Street in Manhattan; on the same street as Jimmy Walker. His father and Mr. Walker's were friends.

The Borough President's father was in the produce business. He moved his family to High Bridge in the Bronx in 1893, when young James was 3 years old. In reminiscent moods, the Borough President remembers when he drove a pony and cart under leafy shade in High Bridge.

"City ducks—kids from Manhattan," he is apt to remember, "came to High Bridge in Summer to swipe fruit from our orchards." The High Bridge urchins met the city ducks at Central Bridge and drove them off with stones.

Mr. Lyons is six feet tall now. He weighs 200 pounds and is gray at the temples. He favors dark clothes and white shirts with stiff collars. No jewelry. His taste in cravats is open to question. His particular pride, as a leather man, are his boots. He wears only goat-skin shoes, made to order at \$30 a pair. He keeps twelve pairs in

what he calls "my active wardrobe."

Mr. Lyons's career, until he took office virtually overnight in 1934, was comfortably dull. "I fell off a pony, once, in Devoe's Lane," he may tell you, but nothing more exciting comes to mind.

As a young man Mr. Lyons rowed and sculled on the Harlem River with Fred Sheppard and Fred Fuesell, champion oarsmen. He won a few trophies but never even fell overboard. "I never rescued a person," he sadly says. "I never was a hero."

Mrs. Lyons, before their marriage twenty-two years ago, was Miss Gertrude O'Brien of Melrose. "A Bronx girl," Mr. Lyons always says, proudly. They have three children. The oldest is James Jr., freshman at Harvard Law School.

The Borough President covers eight to ten meetings almost every night and, though he is a homebody by instinct, seldom gets to dinner parties his wife arranges. He is a joiner, too; belongs to the Rotary, Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and to the Daughters of Jacob, among other clubs. The Daughters of Jacob membership is honorary.

Mr. Lyons belongs to St. Tolentine parish in the Bronx. He is an earnest churchgoer. As a rule, though, public obligations keep him up late Saturday nights and he just about makes late Sunday morning mass.

When Mr. Lyons was graduated from Public School 11 in his thirteenth year he went right into leather. He is education-minded, however, and keeps trying to sell The Bronx as a center of universities and culture.

He eagerly backed a movement for Bronx opera. This failed, and Mr. Lyons was unhappy; but not for long. In his earnest provincialism he warred on non-resident city employes—"carpetbaggers" he bitterly called them—and put over the Lyons Non-Resident Bill.

Rebuked by the erudite Deputy Mayor Henry H. Curran for using "contact" as a verb, Mr. Lyons set up a mock "Curran University" and distributed mimeographed diplomas with reckless hand. In turn, he reproached the Police Department for ungrammatical safety signs and drew humble apology from Commissioner Valentine.

At Board of Estimate meetings Mr. Lyons continues to harass the Fusion majority—particularly Newbold Morris—but only from a stern sense of his duty as one-man minority. He clashes with Mayor La Guardia, again from sense of duty.

"I admire the Mayor," he says. "I have supported him 17,473 times out of a possible 17,579 in the Board of Estimate and that comes to ninety-nine and three-fifths of the time."

He is proud of this record. He says it proves he is no obstructionist. "I'm just a constructive minority," is the way he puts it.

Mr. Lyons's one vice, he admits, is cigarettes. He smokes like a Mississippi side-wheeler. During his mother's lifetime, though, he never smoked in her presence. "She didn't like to see me do it," he explains.

During the hubbub over the cigarette tax Mr. Lyons, despite his friendly feeling toward the Mayor, demanded that the city impose a tax on cigars too. "Mr. La Guardia, who smokes five-cent stinkers, should be taxed," he insisted.

The Mayor said he would be glad to give the gentleman from the Bronx an emergency message for such a bill if he would introduce it, but nothing ever came of it.

At one board meeting Mr. Lyons voted for a \$1,600 piano for Queens College in Flushing. "Let 'em say they have the most expensive piano in the city," he said, generously.

"Why not?" the embittered Mr. Morris retorted. "We already have a very expensive horn in the Bronx."

Sometimes Mr. Lyons, in his excitement, gets into involved grammatical construction. In a fight over a subway extension he turned to the Mayor. "The people of the Bronx," he said passionately, "are getting the foot with a fine Italian hand."

The thorn most often pressed into Mr. Lyons's side is cruel and repeated reference to the Bronx cheer. He devotes a lot of time trying to end this. He thinks he has found a way.

"I will go back into Bronx history," he says. "I will try to sell the idea that the term 'Bronx cheer' originated with the warm hospitality of Jonas Bronck, the first white settler north of Harlem River, who gave our great borough its name."